

Guidance for Principals: Providing Feedback to Teachers

In response to requests we have received from many educators, we have assembled some best practices, tips, and resources for teachers to develop their questioning skills. We asked ten superintendents to put us in touch with teachers and principals who excel at questioning and feedback. We interviewed principals and other instructional leaders from across the state to collect guidance for providing feedback to teachers on the questioning indicator. You may want to use this document in conjunction with “Tips from Teachers: Improving on the Questioning Indicator.”

Post-Conference Questions to Ask

- How do you feel about the amount and quality of student feedback you received?
- What did you notice about the frequency and quality of student engagement and participation?
- Tell me about your approach to planning and developing questions.
- What factors did you take into consideration when planning appropriate questions for your lesson?
- How do you incorporate the content standards and unit objectives when planning your questions for a specific lesson?
- How do you determine which question types to use to foster student success?
- What have you found to be the most effective way to plan and sequence your questioning to push student learning?
- What strategies might you incorporate to get students to initiate and participate in the questioning process?
- What are some ways you could include a high frequency of questions?
- What are some ways you could include a variety of different levels of questions?
- How do you get your students comfortable with answering questions at the evaluating and creating level?

Ideas to Mention When Providing Teachers with Feedback

- **Refer back to the ‘Thinking’ and ‘Problem Solving’ indicators.** These indicators are a great segue into the ‘Questioning’ indicator. Remind teachers that asking a balanced mix of high-quality questions is a way to promote thinking and problem solving.
- **Encourage teachers to *teach* their students to ask questions.** This is not something students will know how to do inherently.
- **Encourage teachers to use question stems.** Once the teacher is comfortable with using question stems, students can and will start mimicking the teacher’s style. Share these stems with students, and ask them to incorporate the questions into accountable talk. Make sure students can see the questions on a daily basis (**Ex.** Anchor chart, taped to desk, on cards in desk, etc.)
- **Never assume that students know the answer.** Always ask.
- **Ask more open-ended questions that can’t be answered with a simple yes or no,** and ask students to back up their responses with evidence (**Ex.** From the text, from their background knowledge, from their notes, etc.).

- **Make sure you are providing wait time.** Establish a routine of asking the question, allowing wait time and then calling on a student to answer. This provides students the opportunity to think and process before the answer is given. This also affords the opportunity for students to quietly confer with one another (*Ex.* Think, Pair, Share) if the teacher chooses to include student to student interaction in the lesson.
- **Develop a process for randomly selecting students** to ensure participation from both volunteers and non-volunteers (*Ex.* Popsicle sticks with names on them, colored dots on desks, etc.).

Strategies for Improvement

- **Pair a teacher who is struggling with questioning with a teacher who excels at it.**

Ex. Ms. Smith struggles with questioning, but Mrs. Wright has mastered the skill. During our post-conference, I would suggest that Ms. Smith observe Mrs. Wright and focus only on her questioning. She should take detailed notes, jot down potential strategies, and identify follow-up questions she would like to ask. After the lesson, I would sit down with Ms. Smith and Mrs. Wright to discuss what was seen. Together, we will identify two to four actionable next steps for Ms. Smith to implement. Ms. Smith will work on implementing these strategies, touching base with Mrs. Wright as needed. In three weeks, Mrs. Wright will observe Ms. Smith and give her some feedback. After another three weeks, I will conduct another observation to see what progress has been made.

- **Make regular feedback a priority.**

When teachers are struggling with particular indicators, they often need regular, consistent feedback to see any true gains. It is not enough to simply wait until the next formal observation to check in. You should do walk-throughs as often as feasible to monitor progress, leave words of encouragement and offer your support. If the teacher feels that you are as invested in his progress as he is, there is more incentive to improve. You can do quick check-ins in the hallway when the teacher is taking kids on a bathroom break, dropping them off for special area instruction, taking them to lunch, etc. It is important to praise even the smallest changes you see happening in the classroom.

- **Have teachers plan questions in advance which are linked to standards and objectives.**

Planning questions in advance ensures that questions are appropriate for the lesson and age group, and that there are no confusing aspects to the questions. Also, by planning questions in advance, the teacher may decide which students would find success with a particular question, thereby building that student's confidence and self-esteem. This also connects to the 'Teacher Knowledge of Students' indicator regarding differentiated instructional methods.

- **Give teachers the opportunity for vertical collaboration.**

Many standards and objectives are taught in a spiral manner, meaning that a student may get a glimpse of a standard in 1st grade, dive a little deeper in 2nd grade, and really master it in 3rd grade. Allowing teachers to meet across grade levels gives the opportunity to develop well-scaffolded questions.

- **Lead teachers to develop their own professional development action plans.**

During the post-conference, ask the teacher to summarize the refinement area and brainstorm what will be her first course of action. Next, have her think of any additional people or resources that may be able to help her improve. This could be a colleague, an upcoming professional development opportunity, a book that the school may consider ordering, etc. Finally, have the teacher set her own deadlines for when she would like you to check in on her progress. This lets the teacher take control of her own development and should increase investment.

Sample Professional Development Action Plans

Example 1

This action plan would be a good starting point for a teacher who is just beginning to focus on questioning.

1. Start by explicitly writing questions into your lesson.

Ex. I will include three checks for understanding during my opening. When creating these questions, I will think about the purpose, how the question aligns to my lesson objective, which level of Bloom's taxonomy is appropriate, which students may be successful at answering each question, what information it will give me about my students' level of understanding, etc.

2. Focus on including questions that are on the higher level of Bloom's taxonomy.

Ex. I know that I need to get my students to the analyzing, evaluating and creating levels of Bloom's taxonomy, so I need to develop a question arc that will get them to those higher levels. I must make sure my questions build on each other and are appropriate for my students' level of mastery.

3. Ask a colleague for feedback on your questions prior to the lesson.

Ex. Once I have written my questions, I will run them by a colleague to ensure the questions are aligned to the standards, are sufficiently rigorous and will make sense to the students. I will use this feedback to tailor my questions before including them in my lesson.

4. Ask a colleague to observe part of a lesson and give you feedback on what went well and how you can improve your questioning skills moving forward.

Ex. I will ask my colleague to keep a running tally of how many questions I asked, what level they were at, and which student answered each one. I will also ask my colleague to record whether the student who answered the question volunteered to do so or was randomly called on. I will provide my colleague with a copy of my seating chart so he/she knows my students' names.

Example 2

This action plan would be most helpful for a teacher who already has some understanding of appropriate questioning, but needs more intensive focus on a specific component of the questioning process.

1. Determine the specific questioning skill that needs refinement.

Ex. Frequency, scaffolding, level, wait time, student involvement, etc.

2. Create a strategy to support improvement.

Ex. To help with the level of questioning, work on how and where to place question stems so the teacher has prompts easily accessible. This may look like an anchor chart, a flip book, a laminated chart, etc. Additionally, you may want to pre-plan some specific higher order questions using those question stems.

3. Set a date and time to follow-up with the teacher to see how the strategy has been implemented and if the teacher has seen success.

Ex. Let the teacher know that in three weeks, you will be checking back in and will be specifically focusing your visit on collecting evidence around higher order questioning.

4. If the strategy has not been successfully implemented, adjustments and an increased support plan should be developed.

Example 3

This action plan would be most appropriate for a teacher who is very self-directed and wants to take ownership over his/her own development.

1. Determine the specific questioning descriptor the teacher wants to refine.

Ex. Does the teacher want to refine his/her ability to ask questions that lead to self-directed learning, text based questions, etc.?

2. Give the teacher a list of options for next steps.

- Observe a video on questioning in the NIET portal or another website and take notes on strategies to incorporate.
- Revisit the lesson plan and purposefully embed effective question stems throughout the plan.
- Schedule a time for an instructional coach or facilitator to model a lesson that includes effective questioning techniques.
- Set up a time to observe a colleague who is strong at questioning.
- Attend a professional development opportunity related to questioning.
- Start a working group to work intensively on the skill of questioning.